

Put that Research Project in a Box

Ah, the research project. That ubiquitous assignment continues to haunt high school history students. In my first year as a student teacher of AP U.S. History, I've had the chance to see firsthand the arduous process of choosing a topic, developing a thesis, gathering resources and evidence, revising an outline and introduction, and building a coherent, focused argument. I certainly remember with grudging appreciation my own experience with historical research and argumentation, timeless skills that should remain a central element of the history curriculum. But I'm surprised at how little the process has changed since my high school days, especially in terms of organization and presentation.

Say No to Tattered Index Cards

Although Internet resources and Google searches have significantly altered the nature of research—students no longer have to spend all of their time in the library stacks—the handwritten index card remains the preferred method for gathering evidence. Sure, they might look nice and crisp at the beginning, but over the course of a semester, the shine wears off. Easy to misplace and hard to revise, the index card organizational scheme seems antiquated and tedious. And, quite frankly, it makes history seem like a total drag—not exactly the sentiment that I want to inspire as a teacher.

But some new digital alternatives are both practical and engaging. In my search for a Web 2.0 tool that would be applicable for teaching social studies, I stumbled upon Museum Box (www.museumbox.e2bn.org), an innovative tool designed for history

classrooms but easily adapted to any discipline.

Museum Box gives students the tools to build an argument or describe an event, person, or historical period by placing items in a virtual box.

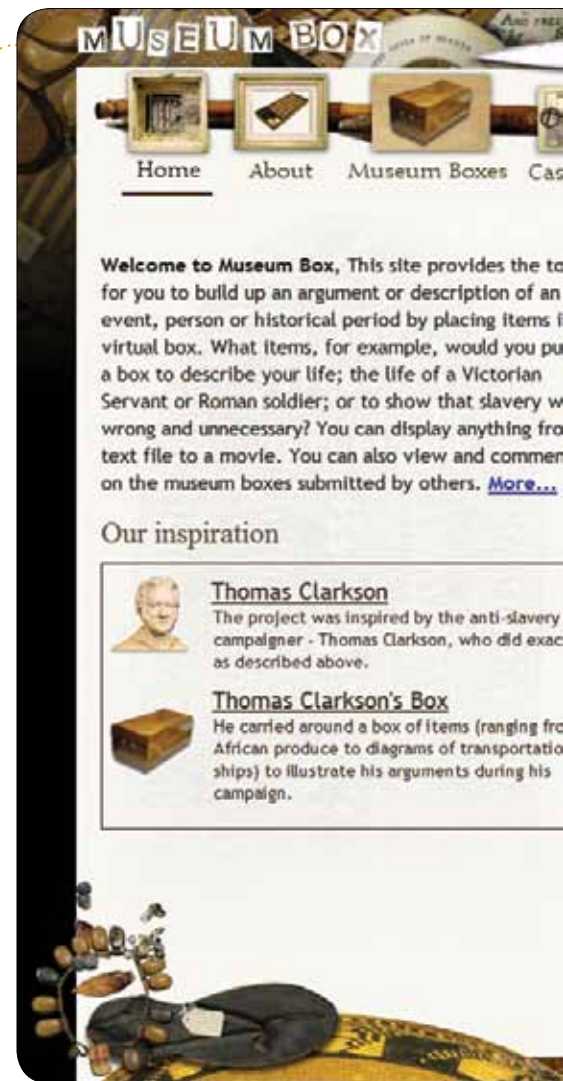
This tool offers students and teachers a myriad of options for research projects, interactive presentations, collaboration, and organization. Museum Box can act as a virtual file cabinet, with separate drawers for audio files, video clips, images, PDFs, Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, original text, and website links. Teachers can devise complex lesson plans with multiple source materials, neatly organized and labeled for easy access. Students can use Museum Box to catalog their research, allowing for constant revision and addition.

Use Artifacts to Illustrate Your Point

Developed by The Abolition Project (www.abolition.e2bn.org), Museum Box was inspired by the story of British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, who worked tirelessly in the 18th century to raise awareness about the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Recognizing that artifacts and pictures influenced public opinion in ways that mere words could not, Clarkson visited ports and toured trading vessels bound for the African coast, collecting evidence in a specialty box. One artifact in particular, the Brookes Diagram, which illustrated the appalling conditions under which African slaves were “packed” and transported across the ocean, deeply affected the public and remains an important piece of historical evidence for teaching about slavery.

Keep All Class Projects in One Place

So how does Museum Box actually work? The first step is to register your



school through the Teachers Area link on the homepage, a process that can take up to five days. A site administrator will contact you to approve your application. Once you are officially registered, you can either add student accounts manually or ask your students to sign up on their own.

From the homepage, students should follow the Start link to create their own museum boxes. An empty project template will appear, with compartments for various artifacts, spaces for titles and descriptions, and options to add images, text, sounds, videos, files, and links. By clicking on the Save link at the top of the page, students can easily create a login name and password. Don't forget to tell your students

By Stella Gorlin



to choose the name of their school from the drop-down menu, so you can access their boxes.

To add artifacts, students can click on an empty box to bring up a six-sided cube. Let's say a student wants to insert an image on the front of the cube. If he presses the Images button at the bottom of the page, a gallery will pop up. The student can either select an image from the Museum Box gallery or toggle to the Your Images tab and upload his own files. Students can follow the same procedure to add video, audio, text, and URLs.

When students have finished adding artifacts, they can turn in their museum boxes using the Submit button in the upper right corner of the screen. From the teacher administrator page, you can review students' boxes, make revisions or suggestions, and either approve or send back for revision, depending on the nature of the assignment. You can also delete boxes if they contain inappropriate material. If you want students to be able to view each other's museum boxes, simply approve their submissions, and their projects will appear in the public gallery, easily linked from the homepage by pressing the Museum Boxes button at the top. You can search for individual boxes or narrow the list to specific schools.

For private assignments, the submission function is an easy way to provide feedback and suggestions. You can also send messages to students as you review their work.

Students Can Work Collaboratively

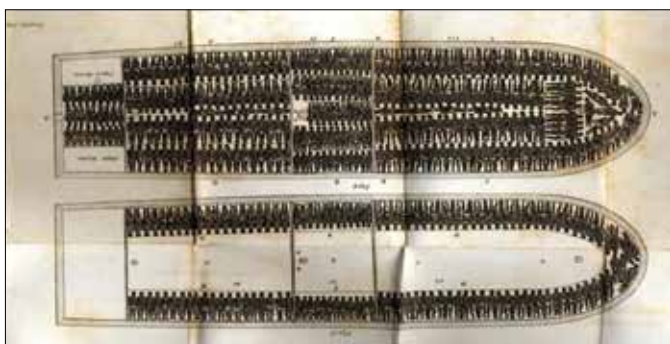
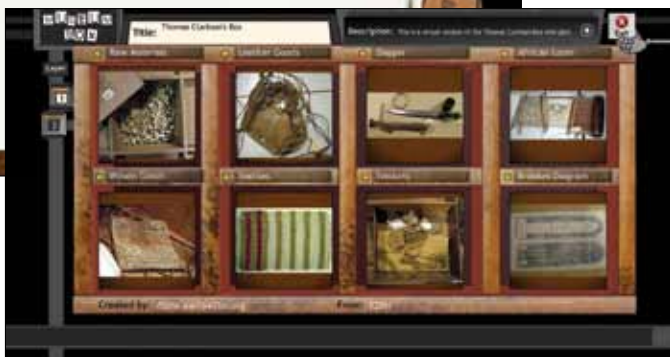
Rather than relying on index cards, the students in my classroom might use one cube per supporting argument, with each of the six sides reserved for a particular piece of evidence from a book or journal article.

Or perhaps you have asked your students to engage in a historical debate. Each side might work collaboratively on one museum box, with the teacher regularly providing advice and guidance through messaging and revision. Time capsules, debate prep, and autobiographies are just some of the possibilities for authentic learning experiences and performance assessments using Museum Box.

Museum Box is not a perfect tool. Some kinks are yet to be worked out, particularly the video upload feature and the lack of a Back button for easier navigation to the homepage. But generally, this tool is easy to use and, as an added bonus, does not allow outside advertising. Most important, it provides a forum to explore a range of source materials that will strengthen arguments and engage students with different learning styles and interests.

Historical research is a complex process, full of false starts and dead ends, with the occasional treasure trove of discovery. We tell our students that their investigations will take them in unexpected directions, that they will constantly modify their arguments, and that new and better evidence will inevitably surface. So we should provide them with the tools to make the entire process easier. Museum Box is one of many new Web 2.0 tools that can facilitate deeper, more meaningful learning experiences.

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